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Igbonisation: Portable Institutionalism, Networked Resilience, and the Political Economy of Igbo Enterprise

Christian Osita Godson[1], Ebubechukwu Osita Godson[2]
[1]York Business School, Department of Project Management
St. John University, York, United Kingdom
[2]Leeds Beckett University
Leeds, United Kingdom

***Abstract* – How can durable economic coordination emerge where formal state capacity is weak, uneven, or distrusted? This article develops portable institutionalism through an historically informed analysis of Igbo socioeconomic institutions in southeastern Nigeria and their reproduction across locations. It conceptualises Igbonisation as the bounded empirical process through which apprenticeship, associational governance, relational finance, reputation, and informal dispute resolution travel with participants and are reconstructed in new commercial settings. The argument bridges micro-level accounts of indigenous entrepreneurship and macro-level theories of state capacity by identifying a meso-institutional architecture that lowers transaction costs, circulates skills and capital, and supports enterprise regeneration. The article further introduces networked resilience to explain how mutually reinforcing human, social, institutional, and reputational resources absorb shocks and reproduce productive capacity. The framework neither romanticises informality nor treats relational governance as a substitute for capable states: exclusion, hierarchy, regulatory evasion, and limits to technological upgrading define its boundary conditions. Portable institutionalism contributes to institutional economics by showing how institutions can be territorially mobile, socially enforced, and developmentally consequential beyond the formal organisations of the state.**

***Keywords* – portable institutionalism; networked resilience; informal institutions; Igbo enterprise; institutional political economy.**

I. Introduction

Mainstream political economy commonly treats effective state capacity as a central condition for long-run development. Institutional economics links prosperity to credible property rights, predictable rules, and organisations capable of enforcing exchange, while state-capacity scholarship stresses taxation, administration, and public authority. These insights remain foundational, but they leave an important question underdeveloped: how do productive institutional orders persist, travel, and regenerate when state provision is weak, uneven, or distrusted?

This emphasis is compelling, but it does not exhaust the institutional possibilities observable in societies where bureaucratic capacity is weak or uneven. Across southeastern Nigeria and the Igbo commercial diaspora, systems of enterprise formation, capital mobilisation, market coordination, and dispute settlement have persisted through colonial disruption, civil war, infrastructural neglect, and restricted access to formal finance (Forrest, 1994; Brautigam, 1997; Meagher, 2010). Such persistence raises a question that remains insufficiently theorised: how do economic actors coordinate, reproduce enterprises, and recover from systemic shocks when formal institutions are inaccessible, unreliable, or only partially effective?

This article addresses that question through the concept of Igbonisation. The term refers here not to cultural assimilation or ethnic superiority, but to the diffusion and reproduction of a recognisable set of decentralised socioeconomic institutions within and beyond Igbo communities. These institutions include apprenticeship and settlement, kinship-based risk sharing, market-association governance, relational credit, reputational sanction, and community-based dispute resolution. Their significance lies less in any single practice than in the way they combine to perform functions often associated with formal bureaucracies, banks, courts, and enterprise-support organisations.

The article's principal theoretical contribution is portable institutionalism: an institutional configuration in which socially embedded rules, organisations, and enforcement mechanisms are carried by participants and reconstructed across territorial settings. The concept adds a mobility dimension to institutional analysis. It explains not only how informal rules coordinate exchange, but how an institutional repertoire can be reproduced after migration, displacement, political exclusion, or economic shock. The associated concept of networked resilience identifies the outcome of this process: productive capacity is regenerated because skills, finance, reputation, monitoring, and sanctions remain distributed across overlapping networks rather than concentrated in a single organisation.

This intervention extends the established Igbo entrepreneurship literature in three respects. First, it shifts the unit of analysis from the apprentice, trader, or firm to the wider institutional architecture within which enterprise replication occurs. Second, it connects the Igbo apprenticeship model to debates about governance, state capacity, transaction costs, and institutional persistence. Third, it specifies boundary conditions and observable implications, thereby avoiding explanations based on

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cultural exceptionalism. The argument is therefore not that Igbo entrepreneurship has been overlooked, but that its political-economic architecture has not been sufficiently conceptualised as a portable system of governance.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 defines Igbonisation and its relationship to portable institutionalism. Section 3 reviews relevant institutional and entrepreneurship scholarship and clarifies the paper's distinct contribution. Section 4 explains the theory-building methodology and its limits. Section 5 develops the conceptual framework and testable propositions. Sections 6–10 apply the framework to historical trajectories, post-war reconstruction, apprenticeship, market governance, and the Nnewi industrial cluster. Section 11 examines counterarguments and boundary conditions, and Section 12 concludes with implications for research and policy.

II. IGBONISATION AS A BOUNDED ANALYTICAL CATEGORY

Definition and Scope

Igbonisation is defined as the reproduction of decentralised Igbo socioeconomic institutions across geographical and generational boundaries. The concept directs attention to the institutional practices that communities carry, adapt, and reassemble when they migrate. Town unions, kinship organisations, market associations, apprenticeship chains, settlement obligations, and reputation-based credit arrangements may be recreated in new settings, thereby reducing the uncertainty associated with entry into unfamiliar markets (Meagher, 2010).

The term is deliberately bounded. It does not imply that all Igbo people participate in the same institutions, that the institutions are culturally uniform, or that similar arrangements do not exist elsewhere. Nor does it attribute economic outcomes to ethnicity as an immutable trait. Rather, Igbonisation identifies a historically situated institutional repertoire whose mechanisms can be compared with other merchant and diaspora systems. Its analytical value depends on demonstrating observable processes—training, financing, enforcement, replication, and adaptation—rather than invoking an essentialised entrepreneurial culture.

Portable Institutionalism and Transaction Costs

Portable institutionalism refers to the capacity of socially embedded institutions to travel with their participants and to be reconstructed without dependence on a fixed territorial bureaucracy. Historically, many Igbo communities were organised through segmentary republican arrangements in which authority was distributed among lineage assemblies, age grades, title societies, and local associations rather than concentrated in a central monarch (Afigbo, 1972, 1981; Uchendu, 1965). This history does not mechanically determine contemporary commerce, but it provides an institutional background in which decentralised coordination and negotiated authority are familiar modes of collective action.

When migrants reproduce town unions, trade associations, apprenticeship relationships, and informal arbitration in destination markets, they lower information and enforcement costs. Participants gain access to market intelligence, credit referrals, dispute mediation, and reputational certification. These mechanisms do not remove transaction costs, and they may generate exclusion or power asymmetries. Their importance is that they provide a governance infrastructure that is less territorially fixed than courts, banks, or state agencies.

Networked Resilience and Institutional Hybridity

Networked resilience describes the capacity generated when portable institutional arrangements remain sufficiently dense to reproduce skills, circulate capital, enforce obligations, and support market re-entry after disruption. The Igba Boi apprenticeship system is a central mechanism because it combines workplace learning, deferred compensation, and settlement capital. The apprentice contributes labour and loyalty over an agreed period, while the master provides training, market access, and an eventual settlement. Reputational consequences help discipline both parties, although they do not eliminate the possibility of exploitation or non-settlement (Obunike, 2016; Irene et al., 2024; Umemezia & Ojukwu, 2023).

Igbonisation is therefore best understood as an adaptive and hybrid process. Relational institutions may substitute for missing formal services, but they also interact with company law, banking, taxation, digital platforms, and state regulation. The framework does not advocate institutional informality as an end state. It asks when relational governance is productive, when it becomes exclusionary or fragile, and when formal complements are necessary for scale, technological upgrading, and rights protection.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Institutions Beyond the State

Institutional political economy has long recognised that formal rules alone cannot account for economic outcomes. North (1990) distinguishes formal constraints from informal norms, while Hodgson (2025) cautions that the distinction requires precise definitions: formal institutions are best identified by their connection to legal systems, whereas informal institutions rest on socially embedded rules and enforcement. This clarification is important here because Igbo commercial coordination is neither ruleless nor simply unwritten; it is organised through norms, associations, obligations, and sanctions that interact with, but are not constituted by, state law.

Similarly, Greif's (1993) study of the Maghribi traders shows how reputation-based coalitions sustained long-distance commerce without centralised legal enforcement. Ostrom (1990) demonstrates that polycentric governance systems can coordinate collective action effectively even in the absence of hierarchical command structures. Related scholarship in state–society relations and governance theory further suggests that institutional order can emerge

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through decentralised social arrangements rather than exclusively through centralised authority (Migdal, 1988; Fukuyama, 2013).

Despite these insights, African political economy scholarship has frequently interpreted informality as residual survivalism or as a transitional phase toward formalisation (Meagher, 2010; Lindell, 2010). Informal markets are often treated as peripheral to "real" institutional development rather than as institutional systems in their own right. Yet ethnographic and economic studies of African markets increasingly show that informal economic systems frequently contain dense governance mechanisms, including arbitration institutions, credit norms, and reputation-based enforcement structures (Meagher, 2010; Diala, 2020).

The Igbo case complicates the residual interpretation of informality. Historical and anthropological scholarship indicates that decentralised authority structures—lineage assemblies, age grades, and title systems—structured governance prior to colonial state formation (Afigbo, 1972; Uchendu, 1965). Economic coordination in such settings did not depend upon centralised sovereignty but on relational accountability and distributed sanctioning mechanisms embedded in kinship and community institutions.

This suggests that the dichotomy between formal and informal institutions may obscure the institutional density embedded in social networks. What matters analytically is not codification by the state, but whether institutional arrangements reduce uncertainty, coordinate expectations, and structure incentives (North, 1990; Rodrik, 2007). Where relational enforcement mechanisms are sufficiently dense, they can perform governance functions commonly associated with centralised bureaucratic institutions.

Beyond the Inclusive-Extractive Dichotomy

Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) argue that inclusive institutions protect property rights, distribute political power, and constrain elite predation, whereas extractive institutions concentrate benefits and inhibit sustained development. The framework is powerful at the macro-historical level, but a binary classification may obscure settings in which inclusion and enforcement are organised through relational or polycentric structures rather than centralised constitutional arrangements.

Precolonial Igbo societies were characterised by segmentary republicanism, with authority distributed among kinship assemblies, age-grade organisations, and civic associations (Afigbo, 1972; Uchendu, 1965). Evidence of commercial specialisation and long-distance exchange suggests that economic coordination could occur without a single bureaucratic sovereign (Dike, 1956). The relevant theoretical possibility is not that decentralisation automatically produces inclusion, but that certain governance functions can be performed through network-embedded participation, monitoring, and sanction.

The Igbo case therefore invites a refinement of the inclusive-extractive dichotomy. It suggests a distributed relational configuration in which property claims, creditworthiness, and contractual obligations may be supported through reputation and repeated interaction. Such arrangements can coexist with extractive state practices and may help economic actors endure them. However, relational inclusion for members can coincide with exclusion of outsiders; consequently, distributed governance must be evaluated by both its coordination capacity and its distributive effects.

From the Igbo Entrepreneurship Model to Portable Institutionalism

Scholarship on Igbo entrepreneurship has established the importance of apprenticeship, mentorship, settlement capital, trade networks, and indigenous enterprise formation (Iwuagwu, 2011; Obunike, 2016; Godson, 2023; Irene et al., 2024; Umemezia, 2023; Umemezia & Ojukwu, 2023). This work explains how apprentices acquire skills, enter business, and reproduce entrepreneurial activity. It also shows that the system functions as an indigenous incubation and financing mechanism, particularly where collateralised credit is unavailable.

The present article supports that literature but differs in analytical level and explanatory purpose. The established model is predominantly economic and entrepreneurial: its focal outcome is entrepreneur or enterprise creation. Portable institutionalism is a political-economy construct: its focal outcome is the production and mobility of governance capacity. Apprenticeship is therefore treated as one mechanism within a wider architecture that also includes arbitration, social insurance, reputation, association-based regulation, and diaspora reconstruction.

Table 1. Distinguishing the Igbo entrepreneurship model from the portable institutionalism framework.

Dimension	Igbo entrepreneurship literature	Portable institutionalism	Theoretical implication
Primary explanandum	Entrepreneurial formation and business success	Mobility and reproduction of an institutional order	Moves from enterprise outcomes to institutional persistence
Unit of analysis	Apprentice, master, entrepreneur, or firm	Interlocking networks, associations, rules, and enforcement mechanisms	Connects micro transactions to meso-level coordination
Core mechanism	Training, mentorship, settlement, and market access	Portable rules, distributed monitoring, reputation, and	Explains how coordination survives relocation and shock

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Dimension	Igbo entrepreneurship literature	Portable institutionalism	Theoretical implication
		associational governance	
Spatial assumption	Usually situated within a market or ethnic business system	Explicitly examines reconstruction across territories and generations	Adds territorial mobility to institutional theory
Outcome	New entrepreneurs and enterprise formation	Networked resilience and regeneration of productive capacity	Links entrepreneurship to institutional political economy
Scope conditions	Functioning apprenticeship and commercial networks	Dense repeated interaction, credible sanctions, and complementary formal institutions	Specifies when the framework should and should not travel

This distinction prevents conceptual duplication. Igbonisation names the empirical process through which the wider institutional repertoire is reproduced; portable institutionalism identifies the general theoretical form; and networked resilience identifies a contingent outcome. The framework would add little if it merely relabelled apprenticeship. Its contribution lies in explaining how multiple relational institutions combine, travel, and partially substitute for territorially fixed state and market infrastructures. Table 1 summarises the difference in explanandum, unit of analysis, mechanism, spatial assumption, outcome, and scope conditions.

Theoretical Gap and Research Question

The literature therefore leaves a gap between micro-level explanations of indigenous entrepreneurship and macro-level theories of state capacity. Recent institutional scholarship has renewed attention to institutional interaction, resilience, and meso-level mechanisms (Buchen, 2024; Hingl and Shera, 2025; Ménard, 2026; Noordhoff, 2026), yet it still says comparatively little about institutional portability: the capacity of a rule system and its supporting organisations to move with participants and be reconstructed across space. The central research question is: how do decentralised, socially embedded institutions become portable, and through what mechanisms does their reproduction generate resilient economic coordination under uneven state capacity?

IV. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative, conceptual political-economy design is used to build and delimit theory rather than to test causal effects with original primary data. Conceptual articles are rigorous when they integrate previously separated bodies of scholarship, define constructs precisely, specify relationships among them, and identify evidence that could weaken or falsify the proposed explanation. Historical institutionalism is appropriate because the paper concerns institutional persistence, adaptation, layering, and response to critical junctures over a long temporal horizon (North, 1990; Thelen, 1999; Pierson, 2004; Greif, 2006).

The analysis combines historical institutional reconstruction, secondary empirical synthesis, and comparative interpretation. Sources were selected for their relevance to four domains: precolonial Igbo governance, colonial and postcolonial political economy, informal market organisation, and apprenticeship-based enterprise development. The objective is not a systematic review with exhaustive database coverage; it is an analytical synthesis that traces recurring mechanisms across different forms of evidence. This limitation is made explicit because the framework should be treated as a set of propositions requiring subsequent empirical testing.

Historical Periodisation

The historical analysis is organised around three periods chosen for their theoretical relevance rather than convenience. Precolonial decentralised governance provides evidence on the institutional repertoire preceding colonial state formation (Afigbo, 1972; Uchendu, 1965). Colonial restructuring constitutes an external reordering of authority and trade (Dike, 1956; Hopkins, 1973). Post-civil-war reconstruction provides the strongest modern stress episode because war, displacement, asset loss, and financial decapitalisation created conditions under which claims about regenerative capacity can be examined (Forrest, 1994; Brautigam, 1997). Together, the periods allow analysis of continuity, disruption, layering, and adaptation without assuming an unbroken or deterministic historical trajectory.

Secondary Empirical Synthesis

The synthesis draws on anthropological studies of governance structures, political histories of segmentary republicanism, research on African informal economies and market associations, industrial studies of Nnewi, and contemporary scholarship on Igba Boi. Evidence is compared for recurring mechanisms, including apprenticeship replication, kinship-based risk pooling, informal arbitration, reputational enforcement, and relational credit. Triangulation across disciplinary sources reduces dependence on any single narrative, although it cannot replace primary measurement of outcomes such as enterprise survival, settlement rates, default, or inclusion.

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Comparative Interpretation and Case Boundaries

In order to avoid cultural exceptionalism, the Igbo case is interpreted alongside institutional research on reputation-based merchant coalitions and embedded industrial coordination (Greif, 1993, 2006; Evans, 1995). The comparison is mechanism-centred rather than a claim of historical equivalence. It asks whether relational contracting, repeated interaction, portable norms, and community sanction solve similar coordination problems across contexts. Features that depend on specifically Igbo histories remain case-specific; features that recur elsewhere may support a more general theory of portable institutionalism.

Propositions, Operationalisation, and Falsifiability

The framework generates four propositions. First, where apprenticeship networks are dense and settlement obligations are credible, former apprentices should establish independent enterprises at higher rates than comparable entrants lacking such networks. Second, relationally embedded credit should exhibit lower information and monitoring costs than anonymous exchange within the same market, although this advantage may decline as networks become geographically dispersed. Third, communities with stronger association-based governance and risk-pooling mechanisms should recover more rapidly from shocks, holding other resources constant. Fourth, the benefits of portable institutionalism should weaken where transactions become impersonal, capital requirements rise, or internal sanctions cannot protect weaker participants.

These propositions can be operationalised through apprenticeship duration and completion, settlement fulfilment, enterprise start-up and survival, intergenerational replication, informal loan recovery, dispute-resolution pathways, network density, and post-shock recovery time. The theory would be weakened if apprenticeship chains do not produce measurable enterprise replication; if reputation does not reduce default or monitoring costs; if network density is unrelated to regeneration; or if comparable formal or informal systems perform equally well after relevant controls. Stating these conditions makes the framework conceptually ambitious but empirically contestable.

V. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: PORTABLE INSTITUTIONALISM

Portable institutionalism builds on institutional economics, embeddedness theory, polycentric governance, and recent work on institutional interaction and meso-institutions (North, 1990; Granovetter, 1985; Ostrom, 1990; Hodgson, 2025; Ménard, 2026). It refers to a system in which rules, organisations, and enforcement capacities are sufficiently embedded in relationships to be reconstructed when participants relocate. It is not synonymous with informality: portability concerns how institutions travel, while informality concerns their relationship to legal enforcement. Nor is it identical to social capital, because it includes rule systems, role differentiation, adjudication, sanctioning, and mechanisms of organisational reproduction.

Table 2. Components and observable implications of portable institutionalism.

Institutional resource	Core mechanism	Expected outcome	Illustrative indicators
Human capital	Immersive apprenticeship and market learning	Skills and enterprise-entry capability	Duration, completion, start-up and survival rates
Social capital	Trust, kinship, repeated interaction, risk pooling	Lower information costs and access to support	Partnership density, non-collateral credit, mutual aid
Institutional capital	Associations, settlement rules, arbitration and sanctions	Coordination and non-state enforcement	Dispute pathways, rule compliance, settlement cycles
Reputational capital	Community memory and consequences for breach	Credibility and reduced opportunism	Repeat trade, loan recovery, exclusion after default

Human Capital

Igba Boi combines technical learning, market immersion, financial judgement, supplier and customer knowledge, and entrepreneurial risk management within live commercial settings (Obunike, 2016; Irene et al., 2024; Umemezia, 2023). Human-capital formation is therefore directly linked to enterprise entry rather than separated from it. The relevant indicators are not simply years of training, but completion, settlement, independent start-up, survival, and the subsequent training of another generation.

Social Capital

Kinship networks, Umunna, age grades, town unions, and market associations can provide information, referrals, emergency support, and informal credit (Uchendu, 1965; Meagher, 2010). Repeated interaction and overlapping social ties may reduce uncertainty, but they also create a distinction between bonding and bridging capital. High internal trust can support members while limiting access for women, outsiders, or actors without recognised sponsors. Social capital is therefore a productive resource and a potential mechanism of exclusion.

Institutional Capital

Institutional capital consists of the rules and organisations that structure behaviour without being fully constituted by the state. Apprenticeship settlement norms, market-association constitutions, age-grade obligations, title-based authority, and community arbitration may allocate credit, resolve disputes, certify reputation, and provide social insurance (Afigbo, 1972; Meagher, 2010; Diala, 2020). Their effectiveness depends on legitimacy, monitoring,

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procedural fairness, and the capacity to impose proportionate sanctions.

Reputational Capital

Reputational capital operates as an informal credit-rating and enforcement mechanism. Because commercial identity overlaps with social identity, breach may affect future trade, access to suppliers, credit, association membership, and standing within the community (Greif, 1993; Meagher, 2010). Reputation is most effective where information circulates rapidly and future interaction is likely. It becomes weaker when exchange is anonymous, networks fragment, or sanctions are captured by powerful actors.

Integrative Mechanism: Networked Resilience

The four resources are mutually reinforcing. Apprenticeship produces skills and new firms; social networks circulate information and support; institutional rules coordinate obligations; and reputation disciplines exchange. When these mechanisms remain sufficiently dense, they can lower the capital threshold for market entry and accelerate economic reconstruction after shock. Networked resilience is therefore not a cultural personality trait. It is a system-level outcome that varies with network density, institutional credibility, inclusion, access to complementary formal infrastructure, and the scale of economic activity. Table 2 identifies their observable implications, while Figure 1 presents the proposed causal sequence and reinforcing feedback.

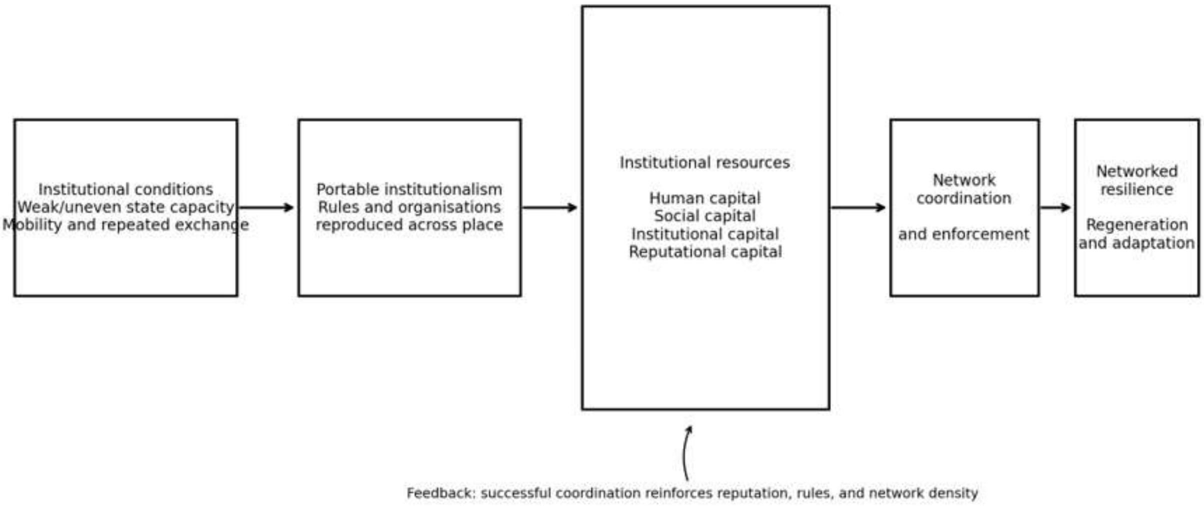

Figure 1. Portable institutionalism and the production of networked resilience.

Note: The arrows represent the proposed causal sequence; the feedback loop indicates that successful coordination can reinforce reputation, institutional credibility, and network density.

VI. HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS AND INSTITUTIONAL PATH DEPENDENCE

Institutional configurations rarely emerge abruptly; they sediment over long temporal horizons. Historical institutionalism emphasises that early governance arrangements can shape later economic behaviour through mechanisms of path dependence and institutional persistence (North, 1990; Pierson, 2004; Greif, 2006).

The Igbo case must therefore be situated within a longer historical arc rather than treated solely as a postcolonial phenomenon.

Archaeological discoveries at Igbo-Ukwu reveal ninth-century bronze artifacts of remarkable technical sophistication produced through complex lost-wax casting techniques (Shaw, 1970). The precision of alloy composition and ornamental detail indicates structured systems of technological knowledge transmission. Similarly, excavations at Lejja and Opi suggest iron-smelting traditions dating to the early first millennium BCE (Okafor, 1992).

These findings challenge earlier colonial-era assumptions that technological advancement in southeastern Nigeria was externally introduced. More importantly, they highlight the existence of organized production systems embedded within decentralised social structures.

Unlike centralised polities such as Benin or Oyo—where craft production was frequently organized through royal courts—Igbo production appears to have been embedded within community-level networks of craftsmen and traders. Precolonial Igbo society lacked centralised monarchic authority. Governance instead operated through segmentary republicanism, structured around lineage assemblies, age-grade institutions, and civic associations (Afigbo, 1972; Uchendu, 1965).

Within such systems, coordination did not depend upon bureaucratic command. Authority was dispersed, and legitimacy derived from communal deliberation rather than sovereign decree.

From an institutional perspective, this matters because decentralised political authority may normalize decentralised economic coordination. When dispute resolution, sanctioning, and collective decision-making are already embedded in horizontal social networks, economic organisation can evolve within similar relational structures (Granovetter, 1985; North, 1990).

This does not imply deterministic continuity between ancient metallurgy and contemporary commercial networks. However, it suggests the existence of long-standing cultural and institutional predispositions toward polycentric coordination.

Under North's framework, informal constraints often persist longer than formal political regimes. Colonial rule therefore altered administrative structures without fully displacing embedded governance norms (North, 1990; Pierson, 2004).

These historical layers help explain why decentralised institutional systems may demonstrate adaptive resilience when centralised governance structures weaken or collapse.

VII. POST-WAR ECONOMIC DISPOSSESSION AND REGENERATIVE RESILIENCE

The Nigerian civil war (1967–1970) constitutes the most severe systemic shock in modern Igbo economic history. Any theory of networked resilience must therefore pass through this historical crucible.

The war was not merely a territorial conflict; it involved widespread infrastructural destruction, population displacement, and economic decapitalization.

Asset Seizure and Financial Decapitalisation
After the war, federal reconstruction policy formally adopted the rhetoric of "No Victor, No Vanquished." Yet in practice economic reintegration proved uneven.

A particularly consequential policy limited access to pre-war bank deposits held by Biafran citizens. Regardless of prior balances, many account holders were restricted to withdrawing a flat sum of £20 (Forrest, 1994; Ukpong, 1975; Duruji, 2009; Obi-Ani, 2009).

This policy effectively eliminated accumulated commercial capital across a generation of traders and entrepreneurs.
Simultaneously, the Nigerian Enterprises Promotion Decrees of the 1970s intersected with uneven access to political patronage networks in ways that constrained participation in emerging oil-sector opportunities.

Whether interpreted as deliberate marginalization or structural realignment of post-war political economy, the outcome was clear: formal pathways to capital accumulation were severely restricted.

Under conventional institutional theory emphasizing centralised enforcement and property rights guarantees (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012), such decapitalization would predict prolonged economic stagnation.
Yet stagnation did not persist.

Relational Capital as Post-Conflict Liquidity
In the absence of restored bank capital, economic regeneration relied heavily on relational mechanisms embedded in kinship networks and apprenticeship systems. Apprenticeship settlement chains resumed. Former masters reabsorbed displaced youth. Extended kinship networks pooled residual assets, and market associations coordinated re-entry into commercial centers such as Onitsha and Aba.

In effect, relational capital substituted for financial capital. Because apprenticeship systems do not require collateralized lending, they remained operational even when formal banking relationships were inaccessible.
Settlement grants (Ndupu) could be modest yet sufficient to initiate small-scale trading cycles. Through repeated reinvestment, capital gradually multiplied within decentralised commercial networks.

This pattern aligns with Greif's (1993) insight that reputation-based enforcement systems can sustain trade without centralised adjudication.
However, the Igbo case adds a distinctive dimension: relational enforcement not only maintains commercial exchange but also facilitates post-conflict capital regeneration.

Spatial Reconstitution and Diasporic Expansion
Another dimension of post-war resilience was spatial mobility.
Igbo traders re-established themselves across Nigerian urban centers including Lagos, Kano, and Port Harcourt. Rather than relying solely on territorial reconstruction, commercial networks became geographically dispersed.
This dispersion reflects the portability central to the concept of portable institutionalism. Governance norms—credit trust, apprenticeship replication, and association-based arbitration—travelled with individuals rather than remaining anchored in fixed physical infrastructure.

By the 1980s and 1990s, Igbo-dominated commercial clusters such as Ariaria Market (Aba) and Alaba International Market (Lagos) had become major trading hubs.
Economic regeneration therefore proved not merely restorative but adaptive.

Analytical Implication
The post-war record is consistent with, but does not by itself prove, the proposed framework. Apprenticeship pipelines, kinship-based pooling, association-based dispute resolution, and reputational enforcement appear to have lowered barriers to market re-entry. Other explanations—including urbanisation, national market growth, individual strategy, and wider macroeconomic change—also require consideration. The theoretically relevant claim is therefore conditional: administrative fragility need not produce complete institutional collapse where relational governance remains credible and sufficiently dense (Migdal, 1988; Rodrik, 2007).

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VIII. THE IGBA BOI APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEM: CAPITAL FORMATION AND ENTERPRISE REPLICATION

The Igba Boi apprenticeship system is the principal micro-foundation of portable institutionalism. Its political-economic importance lies in its integration of human-capital formation, informal venture financing, and relational enforcement within a single institutional relationship.

Apprentices enter into long-term service relationships under established traders, often for periods ranging from five to seven years (Obunike, 2016; Irene et al., 2024; Umemezia, 2023). During this immersion, they acquire not merely technical skills but market intelligence: supplier networks, price arbitrage strategies, inventory management, and customer relations. Unlike formal vocational education, this learning process occurs within live commercial ecosystems.

Upon completion, the master provides a settlement (Ndupu)—a lump-sum grant enabling independent business establishment (Irene et al., 2024; Obunike, 2016). Crucially, this capital transfer is typically non-interest-bearing and lacks formal collateralization. Enforcement does not rely on contract law but on reputational interdependence within dense commercial networks (Meagher, 2010; Diala, 2020).

This arrangement aligns with Greif's (1993) model of reputation-based coalitions. However, two distinctive features differentiate the Igbo case.

First, Igba Boi operates as a mass entrepreneurial replication system. It is not restricted to elite merchant families but permeates small- and medium-scale trading networks. Second, it embeds moral obligation within kinship and community identity. Defaulting on relational expectations can result not only in economic exclusion but also in social marginalization within local networks.

The post-civil war period provides a particularly illuminating test case. Following the Nigerian civil war (1967–1970), many Igbo entrepreneurs were stripped of bank deposits and commercial assets (Forrest, 1994; Ukpong, 1975; Duruji, 2009). Formal financial institutions were largely inaccessible. Yet within a generation, Igbo commercial networks reconstituted themselves across Nigerian urban centers.

While multiple factors contributed to this recovery, apprenticeship-based capital cycling appears to have played a central role. By continually generating new entrepreneurs through settlement chains, the system functioned as an endogenous venture capital mechanism embedded within community networks (Obunike, 2016; Irene et al., 2024).

From a theoretical standpoint, Igba Boi demonstrates institutional substitution: relational networks replicate functions typically associated with formal banking systems and enterprise incubators.

However, the system is not frictionless. Gender exclusion patterns, hierarchical power asymmetries between masters and apprentices, and the absence of formal legal recourse introduce vulnerabilities (Meagher, 2010; Lindell, 2010).

IX. MARKET NODES AS GOVERNANCE ECOSYSTEMS

The spatial manifestation of Igbonisation is observable in dense commercial clusters such as Onitsha Main Market, Ariaria International Market (Aba), Alaba International Market (Lagos), and the Nnewi industrial zone. These spaces are frequently described as trading hubs, but analytically they function as decentralised governance ecosystems.

Market associations regulate entry, mediate disputes, enforce informal rules, and coordinate collective responses to external shocks (Meagher, 2010; Diala, 2020). These associations often maintain written constitutions, disciplinary procedures, and arbitration mechanisms that operate alongside or independently of formal state legal systems.

Such associations may impose sanctions including:
Associations may impose monetary fines, suspend trading privileges, restrict access to supplier networks, or use social ostracism. In this limited sense, they perform quasi-judicial functions within commercial space.

Because most transactions occur within dense relational networks, reputational monitoring reduces the risk of opportunistic behaviour. The probability of repeated interaction raises the cost of defection, reinforcing compliance with informal market rules (Greif, 1993).

Market clusters also facilitate knowledge diffusion. Information about suppliers, pricing, creditworthiness, and product quality circulates rapidly within these environments, creating collective informational advantages.

These dynamics mirror the institutional characteristics of industrial districts observed in other regions of the world (Evans, 1995; Rodrik, 2007). However, unlike many East Asian industrial districts, Igbo commercial clusters evolved largely without centralised industrial policy or coordinated state support.

Instead, coordination emerges through kinship ties, apprenticeship pipelines, and association-based governance mechanisms embedded in commercial networks (Meagher, 2010).

These market nodes therefore represent institutional density in spatial form. Portable institutionalism becomes visible not merely in social relations but also in the spatial concentration of economic activity.

However, geographic dispersion can weaken enforcement density. As traders move beyond tightly knit networks, monitoring costs increase and reputational enforcement becomes more difficult. This highlights an important boundary condition of networked resilience: its effectiveness depends upon relational density.

X. INDIGENOUS INDUSTRIAL CLUSTERING: THE NNEWI CONFIGURATION

If Igba Boi represents the micro-foundation of portable institutionalism, the Nnewi industrial cluster represents its meso-level industrial expression.

Nnewi has frequently been described as an indigenous industrial success story, particularly in automotive spare parts manufacturing and import-substitution assembly. Yet rather than narrating this outcome solely as entrepreneurial exceptionalism, it is analytically more productive to interpret it as a case of distributed industrial coordination under conditions of limited state capacity.

Brautigam (1997) documents how eastern Nigerian industrial development emerged through substitution for absent state functions. In Nnewi, firms often originated within trading networks that gradually transitioned into manufacturing activities.

This transition did not rely on coordinated industrial policy in the developmental-state sense described by Evans (1995). Instead, it depended upon relational financing, apprenticeship-based skill diffusion, and kinship-embedded investment chains.
Several mechanisms are analytically significant.

Embedded Capital Mobilisation
Unlike formal venture capital systems, early-stage manufacturing investments in Nnewi frequently relied on kinship pooling, rotating savings arrangements, and trade-based capital accumulation.
These arrangements lowered entry barriers for industrial experimentation by enabling entrepreneurs to mobilize capital through social networks rather than formal financial institutions.

This resembles relational contracting systems described in the literature on embedded industrialisation (Evans, 1995; Rodrik, 2007).

Knowledge Spillovers and Labour Mobility
Industrial clustering facilitates tacit knowledge diffusion. In Nnewi, workers frequently moved between firms within the cluster, carrying technical expertise, supplier contacts, and market information.
This labour mobility enhanced collective upgrading capacity within the cluster. Such dynamics resemble the knowledge spillovers observed in industrial districts studied within comparative political economy (Evans, 1995).

The apprenticeship system also contributed to technical skill diffusion by producing a steady supply of trained workers capable of transitioning from trade to manufacturing activities.

Institutional Density and the Limits of Informal Infrastructure
Despite electricity instability, credit shortages, and limited industrial policy, production networks persisted through informal credit chains, supplier trust, and apprenticeship-based labour pipelines.

- **Apprenticeship-based labour pipelines**

These mechanisms illustrate how portable institutionalism can scale beyond petty trade into light manufacturing.
However, unlike East Asian industrial clusters where the state mediated technological upgrading (Evans, 1995), Nnewi’s growth trajectory remained vulnerable to macroeconomic volatility.

This highlights a critical boundary condition: networked resilience can generate regeneration but may struggle to sustain large-scale technological upgrading without complementary formal institutions.

Thus, Nnewi should not be romanticized as a fully autonomous developmental alternative. Rather, it illustrates hybrid institutional layering, where decentralised relational coordination operates within—and sometimes compensates for—state weakness (North, 1990; Rodrik, 2007).

XI. COUNTERARGUMENTS, STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS, AND BOUNDARY CONDITIONS

Informality and Regulatory Evasion
Relational contracting may reduce transaction costs, but it can also enable tax avoidance, regulatory circumvention, weak record keeping, and inadequate consumer protection (Meagher, 2010; Lindell, 2010). Portable institutions may therefore support commerce while simultaneously complicating state-building and standardisation. The relevant policy question is not whether one system should displace the other, but how formal regulation can recognise productive relational institutions while protecting public interests.

Bonding, Bridging, and Exclusion
Dense kinship networks can create strong bonding social capital while restricting access for women, non-kin participants, migrants without sponsors, or individuals who challenge established authority (Putnam, 1993; Meagher, 2010; Lindell, 2010). An institution may be effective in coordinating insiders without being inclusive in a wider distributive sense. Claims about resilience must therefore be separated from claims about fairness.

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Hierarchical Asymmetry and Apprentice Protection
Apprenticeship is not fully horizontal. Masters control training, information, working conditions, and settlement, and apprentices may have limited formal recourse where promises are disputed. Reputation can constrain abuse, but it may also protect powerful actors when sanctioning institutions are uneven. Formalised agreements, transparent settlement expectations, and accessible mediation could strengthen rather than destroy the indigenous model.

Scale and Technological Upgrading
Portable institutionalism is likely to work best where relational density is high, interaction is repeated, and capital intensity remains moderate. Large-scale manufacturing, advanced technology, cross-border investment, and complex supply chains require reliable infrastructure, standardised contracts, intellectual-property protection, and formal finance. Networked resilience can generate recovery and entry, but it may not independently produce sustained technological upgrading.

Digital Disruption and Adaptation
Digital commerce weakens some face-to-face monitoring mechanisms while creating new forms of traceability, platform reputation, and network communication. The likely outcome is adaptation rather than simple disappearance. Future research should examine whether association-based verification, digital payment records, and online apprenticeship communities reproduce relational enforcement or expose participants to new forms of fraud and exclusion.

Boundary Conditions
The framework is not a universal substitute for state capacity. Its explanatory power should be greatest where networks are dense, information circulates rapidly, future interaction is likely, obligations are regarded as legitimate, and sanctions remain credible. It should weaken as transactions become anonymous, network membership fragments, capital requirements rise, or internal institutions fail to protect vulnerable participants. Portable institutionalism is therefore best understood as a parallel and potentially complementary configuration of governance.

XII. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION TO INSTITUTIONAL ECONOMICS

The article makes three connected contributions. First, it introduces institutional portability as a distinct analytical property. Existing research explains institutional persistence, change, complementarity, and resilience, but commonly assumes that the relevant rule system is anchored to a territory, polity, organisation, or stable community. Portable institutionalism instead identifies the conditions under which an institutional repertoire can travel with participants and be reconstructed elsewhere. Its observable content lies in replicated roles, obligations, associations, enforcement practices, and pathways of entry rather than in cultural identity alone.

Second, the framework specifies a meso-level bridge between individual enterprise and macro-institutional order. Apprenticeship transactions are micro-level events, while state capacity and legal systems operate at the macro level. Town unions, market associations, lineage organisations, credit circles, and chains of masters and former apprentices form an intermediate architecture through which general norms are interpreted, monitored, and enforced. In this respect, portable institutionalism complements the meso-institutional agenda by showing that the bridging layer need not be a territorially fixed regulatory agency; it can consist of mobile, overlapping organisations embedded in social relations.

Third, networked resilience reframes resilience as a property of distributed institutional resources rather than the survival of a single organisation. The mechanism is conjunctural: human capital supports competence; social capital provides information and access; institutional capital supplies rules and adjudication; and reputational capital makes conduct visible and future-oriented. None is sufficient alone. Their interaction lowers transaction costs, enables regeneration after disruption, and creates feedback through which successful coordination strengthens the credibility of the network.

These contributions matter beyond the Igbo case. The framework is potentially applicable to migrant commercial communities, diasporic production networks, mobile professional communities, and displaced populations where institutions are reconstructed through repeated association. It should not be presumed to apply wherever ethnic or family ties exist. Comparative testing must establish whether rules are genuinely reproduced, whether sanctions remain credible, whether new entrants can be incorporated, and whether coordination produces durable productive outcomes rather than merely distributing rents within a closed group.

XIII. CONCLUSION AND RESEARCH AGENDA

This article has conceptualised Igbonisation as the bounded empirical process through which decentralised Igbo socioeconomic institutions are reproduced across locations and generations. Its principal theoretical contribution is portable institutionalism: the capacity of socially embedded rules, organisations, and enforcement mechanisms to travel with participants and be reconstructed beyond a fixed territory. Networked resilience names the resulting capacity to regenerate enterprise and coordination through the interaction of human, social, institutional, and reputational resources.

The argument extends the Igbo entrepreneurship model rather than competing with it. Existing scholarship explains how apprenticeship creates entrepreneurs and supports enterprise formation. The present framework explains how apprenticeship interacts with relational finance, market associations, social insurance, dispute resolution, and reputational enforcement to create a wider governance architecture. This shift from enterprise creation to institutional coordination is the paper's distinctive political-economy contribution.

The framework also qualifies its own claims. Relational institutions may exclude outsiders, reproduce hierarchy, facilitate regulatory evasion, and struggle with capital-intensive or anonymous transactions. They do not make state capacity unnecessary. Their developmental value is likely to be greatest when they are complemented by infrastructure, fair regulation, formal finance, enforceable rights, and mechanisms that protect apprentices and other weaker participants.

Empirical research should now map apprenticeship chains, compare settlement and enterprise-survival outcomes, measure informal credit performance, analyse gendered and outsider access, and assess recovery following economic shocks. Comparative studies should test whether the proposed mechanisms operate in other merchant and diaspora systems. Such work would establish whether portable institutionalism is a useful general category or a case-specific interpretation of Igbo economic organisation.

The broader implication is that institutional analysis should not equate weak bureaucracy with an absence of governance. In some contexts, institutions travel through people, associations, obligations, and reputations. Recognising those arrangements provides a more complete account of economic coordination while preserving the critical distinction between resilience, inclusivity, and long-term development.

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